

## **Dany Boy**

I was a tow-headed nine-year-old boy with sparkling sky blue eyes and an impish nature. We lived in the dry northwest area of Kansas in a one room sod house on a hundred acres of corn and wheat; my mother's parents and her two married brothers lived nearby with their wives, but they still didn't have no babies. Her brothers had made a trip to Denver to find their brides. The girls weren't good looking or maybe they wouldn'ta married these tall strangers with dark brown hair like Ma's. She was pretty with long hair down to her round bottom. I wanted to find a girl like Ma and have babies with her. I'd build us a sod house just like this one real close by. It took everyone to run a farm this size in the 1880s.

Pa's father had picked up a wounded Cheyenne squaw after the Sand Creek Massacre where the Army had rode up on a peaceful band of Cheyenne and Arapahos camping and making love by the crick and killed them. They didn't think Nashu was still alive or she'd a'been raped and then her throat slashed like the other squaws. White's wanted to eliminate the redskins and so they committed genocide, thinking they was superior to the godless savages who only wanted the freedom to live and love.

Her name meant beautiful, and Pa said she was gorgeous. Grandpa McDowell loved her fiercely, and she produced my yellow-haired and sky blue-eyed Pa. She's the one that put the sun in his eyes and mine. They didn't have no more kids so he was an only child. It was too bad Grandpa McDowell was killed by some bank robber when he

run out into the street trying to stop the gangsters with his six shooter. Understand he was a big brave man who didn't take no guff like Pa.

Guess a fellow with the last name of Hill married Nashu, then he died of something and another feller took her off somewhere. Pa remembered his pretty and loving Cheyenne Ma. He periodically took me out riding towards Colorado for hours until the sun set over the plains. From our place, we could see the tips of the Rocky Mountains. He were hoping to find Nashu and bring her home with her sun shining eyes. Never found her. Life are like that. Ya never knowed, did ya?

I loved the smell of dirt and growing things. Grandpa McDowell had built this sod house for Nashu and their two stillborn children, both girls, so Pa just stayed in it since he felt his ma's spirit looking out after him. He was twelve when the feller threw his ma over the saddle and hauled her down the dirt trail, heading west, maybe to Colorado where they had water and mountains. Said it was real lonely till he met Ma in Eckerly. They was both teens and the same age. Her family was Presbyterian and he was Catholic so he converted since it was easier and Pa thought religion made no difference a'tall. They was happy and in love. Our little sod home was full of it.

Grandpa, Pa, and my two uncles had fought for the North during the Civil War to end slavery. They had invited a family of blacks to homestead a place adjoining our farm. Washington was my only friend since for miles around since there weren't no other families. Maggie and Ida were friends with my younger sisters. When we finished all the chores, we ran the mile to each other's house where one of our moms fed us a big meal, then we'd play in the dwindling sunshine until dusk. People said that blacks had a smell, but I thought they smelled like us. It was a good life and everyone loved each

other. Schooling weren't around so the two moms held classes in the candle light, the wax bringing a nice scent to our noses. We was either there or over here learning to read, rite, and do rithmatic when we wasn't working.

All of us kids liked milking the jersey cow we named Mabel after one of Pa's stillborn sisters. We'd get to squirting each other, then get back ta filling the milk bucket when we heard Pa or Ma coming. They'd look in and ask, "Why you kids laughing and having fun?"

I'd say, "We just like squeezing Mabel's teats. They're soft and they give us a nice warm drink." I squirted some milk into Minnies' small mouth. She licked her pink lips innocently, her sky blue eyes twinkling. Soon as they left, we had more fun milking Mabel's long pink teats.

The older one, Martha, looked like Ma with long brown hair. She was the prettiest of the bunch and we was worried that when she got older, the rough men in town would want her. Pa said he'd find someone for her at a church and after making sure he was an honest and good man, bring him out since towns were dangerous for pretty girls.

One night, my grandpa woke up before dawn, coughing. His chest hurt and he was tired, but he got up, milked the cows, and went to work on the farm. Me and Pa worried about him, so at lunch, Ma made him some dandy lion tea mixed with thyme, hoping it would help, but it got worse. Coughed his fool head off and his chest burned like the dickens.

We didn't go play with our only friends after supper because we worried about Gramps. Everyone gathered in the one room sod house and watched him suffer as he

got worse and worse. Pa and Ma feared Grandpa might die. The girls wept and I clinched my freckled and sunburned jaws to keep from ajoining them.

Grandpa didn't complain. He just coughed and held his sides, his brown eyes showing the pain he was in. Said it was worse than when a rebel soldier hit him in the chest with a musket ball and even worse than when a doc dug it out. Wore the musket ball on a leather strap around his choking neck.

We couldn't help him.

He coughed and spit up sputum as a fever took hold of his body and made it shake, sweat running off like he was standing under a waterfall, dehydrating.

Pa motioned at me. "Let's ride into town and bring out Doc Brown. Maybe he'll know what to do."

It took us all night to make it into Eckerly since weren't much around. Doc Brown's office was closed so we sat out front with the horse at the feed trough. Pa handed me a piece of antelope jerky from his front shirt pocket.

"Where's you'rn?"

"You eat it, I ain't hungry."

I knew he was so I tore off a chunk with my funny-looking front teeth too big for my mouth. I was nine and tough. Pa said I was gonna be a big man. "You're strong as a mule and a good shot. Glad you got that antelope two weeks back or we wouldn't have any meat, 'less we killed a hog, but it ain't time since they got some growing to do."

I gave him half and he took it, his mouth watering. We watched each other tear and chomp on the jerky for a while, then it was gone.

People started moving around town and they kicked up odd-smelling dust like somebody puked in front The Lonesome Bar next door. Made me cough and sneeze. Made Pa think I had what Gramps did. I liked being out on the farm where the air was fresh and no mean-looking men spit their chaw on the wood sidewalk. Big skies, thunder clouds and lightning made the sky bleed water. Turned the fields green with corn and wheat. I smelled a pipe burning golden Virginia tabacchi. Wanted to try it but Pa said it weren't good for ya and cost money.

Musta been around eight in the morning and the sun was making everything hot. We didn't have hats 'cause they cost money so we held our hands above our sky blue eyes so's we could see across ta the east, thinking the doctor might live out that way.

Doc Brown showed up from the rear, making us jump up scared and ready to swing a fist or two. Smelling of medicine, he asked us what was wrong, knowing someone must be sick since we brought the old squeaky farm wagon into town.

"The wife's pa is sick. He got a cough and he's burning up and sweating from a terrible fever."

Doc's face paled. He run into his office and grabbed a black leather bag, then crawled into the front seat of the buckboard. I rode as close as possible to them since the back of the wagon bounced worse. That's why we called it a buckboard. Had my .22 rifle with open sites in case I saw a rabbit or something to knock down for food. My gun could hold seventeen long rifles.

I was ready.

Soon, I did, cause I had sharp blue eyes that Mom said had a piece O'sunshine in them. I was the family entertainment since I was always singing, dancing, and

teasing. I liked to carry my sisters around one at a time on my back since they was light and I was strong. I was already taller than Ma, and she'd walk up and say, "Dany, some girl sure gonna love you."

Knew I'd love her too – like Pa and Ma loved each other and us. I was figuring on four kids, maybe more, God willing.

I quietly said, "Pa, there's some deer over that rise. I just saw some horns come up."

He pulled back on the horse's reins. She was a black beauty and strong. The mare hardly broke a sweat even when she pulled the big shining plow through the heavy dark sod. I sure loved her. Heck, I loved everybody. Ma said I had the heart of Jesus in my chest. We loved the Lord, singing church songs and praying as we worked. I liked going over to Washington's dirt mud house 'cause they knew a lotta them southern gospel songs. Washington had a deep loud bass and I was a Irish tenor. Harmonized with the good family. They was loving and kind. Always a bunch of hugs to send us home. Couldn't figure out why people were suspicious and didn't trust the darkies.

Ma and Pa hugged our friends and always sent them home with a bowl of stew and beans or something sweet.

I stepped down from the wagon, my eyes on the hill where I seen the horns pop up. Like an injun, my feet were quiet despite my heavy farm boots, and I snuck up the low sandy hill softly, my heart pounding too loud. I crawled the last few feet, keeping my head down, glad I didn't own a hat. At last, I lay my rifle in my left hand, the warm earth keepin' her steady. I scanned. Didn't want to knock down a momma, cause I'd have to

take her sweet fawn. I prayed silently, “Lord, thank you for providing us meat.” We’d been eating beans and tators, and Ma would shore appreciate some venison.

The buck was a big old bull, six points on each side. I was close enough to smell his rank hormones. I aimed between his powerful front legs as he looked right at me with those big brown innocent eyes. Seems I was a ghost. Didn’t want to mess up his head so Pa could park it on the barn wall with the others I’d brought home. A tear approached my eyeball but I fought it off. Squeezed the trigger as I exhaled. A .22 bullet ain’t big enough to take an adult down. I had to hit this majestic bull straight in the heart so it would instantly kill him. I’d never made a gut shot but seen it when Washington’s Pa missed a running antelope’s heart. Sure made a mess since he had a Winchester 30-30 from the war. He’d also fought against the rebels in a black volunteer regiment. Fought vomit as I helped clean it ‘cause there was smelly half-digested food and shit everywhere.

The big bull stared into my eyes when he realized I shot it. It took two steps and keeled over dead, its legs and sides a shaking. I stood and waved my sunburned arms. “Go on girls, take yer kids and git out of here. Sorry for killing your handsome husband.”

I walked over and looked at this incredible animal I killed. “I’m sorry I killed you but we just gotta eat.” Fought the tears that wanted to come outta my sad eyes.

Pa and Doc Brown showed up. We cleaned it and left the guts laying for the coyotes. The innards’ smell waifed up and nearly made me sick but didn’t seem to affect the men so I clinched my sunburned jaws and helped best I could.

Back on the dirt trail, the deer's big body crowded me to one side as we bounced along in the buckboard. Hated it's dead smell but thought about eating a steak tonight. My hungry belly made my mouth water.

Ma and the girls ran out when they heard the squeaking wagon wheels go quiet. Gram came out, wringing her wrinkled hands with blue veins marking them. Ma said she was pretty back when she was young. Time did that to a person; maybe I'd get old too. Had a bad feeling.

She grabbed the man's arm and with a shaky voice said, "Doc Brown, I'm so glad you're here. My husband is suffocating."

He grabbed his black bag and headed in as we followed. He quickly turned around, his free hand out in a stop sign. "No. This house is quarantined. I think he has tuberculosis and its highly contagious." He looked at us. "Ya'll need to burn your clothes and wash down with alcohol." Seems there was a family in the village who just died of it. Grandpa had ridden in last week for some ammo for my .22.

I felt guilty.

He locked the wooden door 'cause Gram tried to push in behind him, her brown eyes weeping.

I asked, "What's tuberculosis?"

Ma and Gram didn't know, but Pa heard of it during the battle of Gettysburg. "Heard it's some bug that stuffs yer lungs up and kills ya."

A chill ran around our family. We had all been exposed to this horrible way to die. I prayed, "Dear Jesus, if it's your will that some else has to die, make it me." I looked around. I loved them so much, if one of them died, my heart would frizzle and I'd die

too. I caught Ma's big brown eyes. "One of us gotta go in and feed him when Doc Brown comes out," I said forcefully, "It's gonna be me."

"No, I'll take care of my pa."

"Ma! You're pregnant and the whole family depends on you. I'm the only expendable one around here. The girls are young and Gram's too weak. If'n she goes back in there, she'll be gone."

Pa looked at me, a tear forming in his warm sky blue eyes that had a piece of the sun in them. He reached his big calloused right hand out and took mine in his. "Dany, you're a brave young man." He wiped a blue tear from his eye. "I hope you don't get it." The sunshine left Pa's eyes.

"Me too, but..." I shrugged.

I lost my words. I knew I'd catch it but it weren't a weight on my shoulders. It was a gift of love to my family. They'd remember me in their hearts and maybe tell the next generation a little about me.

Ma and Gram wept and patted my shoulders, saying they didn't want me to die, but the decision was made. I'd take responsibility for Grandpa. I shore loved him and couldn't let him die in there by his self. He had to eat and suck down water, and somebody had to get him onto a bucket so he could relieve his self. Gram said he'd already lost his appetite 'cause his nose and throat were all plugged up with yeller snot.

Me and Pa went to work on the big buck. Ma was sure happy to have some meat. After we got the deer skinned and hanging, I knocked on the door. "Doc Brown, you need anything?"

He came to the door, an alcohol soaked clothe in his hands. He wiped the door handles off and looked at me. "Your grandpa is dying. Patients suffer for around three or four weeks then they suffocate. I gave him a shot of morphine so he's sleeping now."

I took his brown eyes in mine. "I'm the one whose gonna take care of him." I looked back at my folks.

They nodded.

Doc shook his head and tipped his black felt hat ta me. "You are one brave young man. Such a shame." To hide the moisture in his eyes, he stepped past me and stood on the wobbly wooden step to tell the family the diagnosis and the fact that Gramps would die pretty quickly. "Maybe Dany won't get so sick he'll die. He might be lucky."

I looked up at the clear blue sky and saw my buddy, Jesus.

He smiled.

Knew I'd be shaking His hand soon. Kinda looked forward to it, but then I saw my mother's hot tears on her pale cheeks. I'd shore miss them. But heck, maybe I could still hang around with them. I'd help Pa with the chores, and assist Ma serving dinner. I could sleep with them on the corn shuck bed and keep 'em warm. Maybe I could protect them.

A yellow glow appeared around my youngest sister's blonde head. I realized I'd save her life when a stranger tried to rape and kill her after she went into puberty.

Doc Brown didn't want to go back in so he went over to the barn and carefully peeled his clothes off then dropped them in an old bucket. He'd have to ride inta town naked and so would whoever took him.

We burned everyone's contagious clothes in the bucket out in front of the grey mud house as Ma and Pa talked about where the family would stay since the sod house was quarantined. I felt weird to be naked in front of my sisters so I put my hands over myself like they did theirs. I'd never see a girl without clothes and was ashamed it made me excited. Didn't realize Ma had firm sweet breasts since she was modest and kept 'em covered with her long flour sack dresses. Understood why she and Pa was always making the mattress jump and shake. I got a little grin and wiped it off with the back of my sunburned freckled hand.

Doc Brown sat in the horse dip, then he had us all jump in and rub the poison water on the places where bugs could hide out and make a feller sick.

Doc told us how to get the sod house clean after Grandpa went to meet Jesus. We all knelt and prayed, then I took Doc Brown back to Eckerly.

I was terribly embarrassed about going into town without a stitch on my back, but Doc Brown said it were something we had to do. "They'll point and stare but just ignore them. They'll understand after I tell them your Grandpa is dying of tuberculosis."

I was a touch sunburned when I got back, especially in those places that never saw the sun. Couldn't touch it to take a pee and got urine all over my feet and legs. Shook my head. Had to accept this life. It was the Lord's will. I looked up, hoping to see Jesus.

He was busy helping somebody else.

It was weird I was the only one naked.

Grandma felt sorry for me and gave me a fifty pound flour sack she had cut a hole for my head.

Ma went through her medicinal herbs and made everyone drink a cup or two, hoping it would help them not get sick and cough like Grandpa. She had some nice hot soup ready for Grandpa

Gramps were a good man, a good father, and he had worked hard his whole life so we could eat. We'd miss him, but knew he'd be with our Lord. I told Ma about seeing Jesus up in the sky and how he had rode back with me on the carriage, telling me how it was to go during the next few weeks. "It's a bad way to die." I explained, "Yer nose runs and the film pushes gobs down yer throat and gets plugged up in all your air pockets so you slowly suffocate. I'll probably put a bullet in my heart after he goes. Jesus said He was sorry it was so painful."

"Isn't suicide a sin? You could end up in hell."

"The Lord said in this case, it wouldn't be. It's a short cut. I'll be with Gramps and my buddy in the afterlife, and I'll look out for you and Pa. 'Sides if'n I don't, one of you would take care of me, then you'd get sick. Next thing, the whole bunch would be dead."

Ma took a long breath, knowing I was right as three rabbits.

I joined Grampa in the sick jail and gave him a shot of morphine the good doc gave me and he fell hard asleep.

The next morning, I heard a sound on the wood step outside the door and waited a moment 'fore pulling it open with a loud creak. Ma gave me a little wave. She wasn't crying, having accepted I was leaving with her pa. I carried the small iron pot of delicious smelling soup into the sod house where Grandpa laid coughing and choking to death despite the drug soothing his fragile body. I sat it on the rickety table and pulled

an old wooden chair he had built next to his self. It was sad, but it was his time and soon would be mine. I took his hand. "I'm here to help you meet our friend, Jesus."

He coughed and after a moment, managed to say, "Thank you, Dany. You're a brave boy."

"Yer too. You're dying with grace." I got him sitting up against the grey mud wall and moved the soup pot to the floor next to my chair. Okay, next step. I got the ladle full and without spilling any, put it to the handsome old man's lips. He had just coughed hard and should be able to get a few sips in afore the next one hit his scarred lungs. His deep brown eyes were watery but he wasn't scared. He had fought in many battles during the Civil War and come through them to go to the other side in this manner. Strange, I thought. I figured I'd be killed in some gun battle since the times was tough and there was lots of mean outlaws who never hesitated to take advantage. I'd go like this brave man – with dignity and honor. I'd put a bullet through my beating heart so Ma and my sisters wouldn't have to look at my shattered head.

I wanted to be a tough man like Grandpa. Heck, I was nearly a man since I was nine and a big kid.

Pa said so.

For the next weeks, Ma put a pot of something smelling great on the wood step every morning near sunrise. They was staying with the Kings who made 'em keep the clothes they gave 'em. She wore a bandana over her face and used alcohol on the iron pot when I put it back out. We didn't want anyone else to die this way.

Next day, everyone followed her over when she brought the spiced soup in the black pot, just enough for the two of us dying fellows. They stood away and blew me

kisses. I didn't blow them back since I wanted them to think I wasn't dying. Fought to keep from hacking and spitting till I heard the sounds of their shoes shuffle away after singing a song to the Lord. They needed to think I wasn't sick, but I was dying along with Grandpa. Dang my whole body hurt and my lungs burned. We was good buddies going to meet Jesus. I wondered if there was a happy hunting ground.

A month later, me watching him suffer and gagging as I coughed and spit up yellow stuff, I hit his skinny leg with a shot of morphine, and Grandpa finally passed in the long suffering night, suffocated. Drowning woulda been quicker and a lot better.

After pulling Gramp's clothes off, I wiped his frighteningly thin body down with the grain alcohol Pa brewed. They'd have to put him in the wooden coffin naked so's they didn't catch tuberculosis. I put Grandpa out on the steps when dawn hit. Immediately, three buzzards circled overhead. Wasted a .22 shell but scared them off, one of them lost a feather or two.

I'd check again after a bit.

I stared at the tips of the blue Rocky Mountains with snow on their peaks. My heart kinda yearned. I'd never see them.

Maybe next life.

Burned our clothes and the bedding in the cast iron cook stove. The corn shuck mattress was a real headache 'cause I had to pull 'er apart and push it in ta the stove. It was like a funeral pyre, the black and grey smoke churning out the bent steel chimney from the mud house. Hoped the smoke would blow north in case it still carried the bugs. Wondered what tuberculosis germs looked like. Doc said they was tiny and ya needed a

microscope ta see 'em. I looked around the dark room with two windows in the front. Everything was alcohol wiped.

Think I had 'er.

In the corner sat my .22 with Grandpa's brand under the metal butt plate. He'd showed me once. It was a rocking J or T, not sure which. I was three or four when he showed me.

Looked out.

Those danged birds swooped down. One was hopping right at Grandpa's naked white body.

My .22 rifle cracked.

Hit him in the head.

His buddies took off with a frightened squawk. I yelled, "I'll kill ya too, if ya come back!"

I left the door open in case. They were hungry like I used to be. Now I had no appetite and looked skinny like my sadly naked Grandpa lying in the dust out front. We were ashes to ashes and dust to dust like Gramma said. Shook my head, seeing my corpse out there in the same place. They'd toss it naked in the coffin with Grampa's.

I shivered. I was nearing death so I needed to kill myself.

I was coughing up shit and had a problem since it's near impossible to shoot yerself in the heart with a rifle. My chest sure burned and every muscle and joint in my body hurt like hell. I didn't want to put the barrel in my mouth 'cause of the mess. The girls would go ta crying hysterically and have bad nightmares.

Hell of a time rigging up a little rack with crossed sticks balanced and tied together ta hold the gun. Good thing I saved string and the buttons from Grandpa's shirt a'fore I burned it to grey ashes, my eyes still burned from the smoke.

Nothing mattered.

I asked Ma to bring something I could use to pull the trigger. She didn't have no thread. Next morning with a beautiful sunrise hitting the snow on the peaks of them there blue Rocky Mountains, Pa put some wire outside on the wood step but forgot the pliers.

He waved goodbye and I hollered, "Love you, Pa. Tell Ma and the girls how much I love them!" He was gone across the popping up green corn shoots. I shoulda told him to tell Washington's family I loved them too.

I stood bare-assed, staring at the beautiful peaks for the last time, a yearning in my soon-to-be shot pounding heart. I looked up and saw five buzzards eye-balling Grandpa.

Used my teeth to bend the wire back an forth. Broke a couple of chips off, but no matter, they weren't no use after this. My rifle kept falling over and since it had a soft trigger, and I wasted some of the expensive shells. Thought about how my grandpa had ridden in to town for the ammo and got the bugs. At least the shots kept the buzzards from his dead body. The smell of decay hit my sensitive nose so I shut the old wooden door. I didn't want my family to look in when I killed myself. The girls were too young and the women were too tender.

I was just in time.

Outside, I heard my family singing, “What a friend we have in Jesus.” I recognized Washington and his family was there, singing loudly, the women folk crying and bawling.

I felt bad for them. Darned, my whole body hurt and I was weak as a new born puppy with its eyes still closed. Hoped I could get this done and do ‘er rightly. I worried my rigging might not work since the pulley thing was old and rusty. It might fall off, then I’d have to try again. The contraption was complicated, wire running back to the wheel I had wired to the back of a chair Grampa had made for us. Sure love him. He was dead like I was gonna be.

They waited outside for the gunshot and I was ready to meet my best friend. I pulled the wire and felt the gun powder burn my skin. Sensed nothing at first. This was a good way to die. I was like that old bull deer with six points I shot six weeks back. Hoped he’d forgive me for killing him.

I staggered and fell.